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ABSTRACT

This two-page flyer briefly describes Maine's Support Network for Rural Special Educators, which provides content-related information and support to special education teachers and related service personnel. Initiated in 1986 to combat the high turnover rate of special education staff in Maine's rural schools, the program stresses the role of collegiality in professional growth. In 1990, 90 percent of all school districts and 75 percent of special education teachers and support service personnel were involved in some aspect of the Network. The Network uses three vehicles to provide information and support: (1) regional support groups (meeting three times per year); (2) teachers' academies (two 4-day summer programs); and (3) a yearly state-wide winter retreat. The Network encourages on-going practice and application of skills and information gained during regional meetings and academies; development of regional plans to involve regular education teachers; and formation of regional advisory groups. Job satisfaction surveys indicate that the Network has increased participants' levels of job satisfaction, primarily due to lessening feelings of isolation and to sharing of teaching resources and strategies. A contact name and address are provided. (DB)

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INFORMATION BULLETIN #31

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MAINE'S SUPPORT NETWORK FOR RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

MAINE SUPPORT NETWORK · RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS · SCHOOL

SUCCESS THROUGH COMMUNICATION

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National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
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"What a wonderful network we are! How we keep each other happy and sane in the field of special education. We brainstorm, share new knowledge, excitement, enthusiasm, love of life and job!"

"It is an accessible professional organization that successfully unifies the special educators of our state."

"We get great up-to-date information. We have input into program planning to be assured that our local needs are met . . . "

Initiated in the fall of 1986, Maine's Support Network for Rural Special Educators (the "Network") works to recruit and retain special education personnel in Maine's rural schools. The Network demonstrates how a rural state can simultaneously provide content-related information, as well as support, to its education-related personnel, resulting in lessened feelings of isolation as well as increased education-related knowledge. The basic structure, processes, and materials used by the Network can easily be replicated by other states with rural regions.

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MAINE'S SUPPORT NETWORK FOR RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

"Our biggest problem . . . ? It comes down to warm bodies . . ."
Hancock County Special Education Coordinator

Maine's Support Network for Rural Special Educators demonstrates how a rural state can simultaneously provide content-related information, as well as support, to its special education teachers and related service personnel.

The Network was initiated in 1986 in order to diminish the high turnover of special education staff in Maine's rural schools. The number of vacancies and turnover for special education personnel is higher than any other academic area. The impact of this turnover on the quality of education for students with handicaps in rural Maine is disturbing at best and disastrous at worst. The isolation--physically, intellectually, and emotionally--is a major reason for leaving the field.

The underlying assumption of the Network is that teachers and related service personnel need support as well as challenge in their jobs, that collegiality is a necessary condition for professional growth, that teachers can play a powerful role in helping one another, and that structures can be developed to allow and encourage such continued growth.

In 1990, 90% of all school districts in the State of Maine participate in the Network program, and approximately 75% of the special education teachers and support service personnel are involved in some aspect of the Network. Though designed to retain special education personnel, the Netwok also encourages participation from regular education teachers.

The two major components of the Network program are:

1. **Provision of content-related information, and;**
2. **Provision of support, through participation in involvement activities.**

In providing information and support, the Network uses three vehicles:

1. Regional support groups have been formed in seven sections of the state. Within each of these regions three peer support and problem-solving sessions are held annually. While one or two content-related topics may be covered, a dual primary function is to provide support to the participants.

2. Teachers' Academies: Based on needs identified by teachers in each region, Academies are conducted each summer. Regions join together to form two groups, each hosting their own summer academy. Lasting four days, the Academies emphasize both professional and social/personal development. The agenda is filled with content-related presentations, as well as involvement activities.

3. Winter Retreats: Once a year a state-wide meeting is held during the mid-winter. Several different content-related topics may be covered. In addition, opportunities are provided for the facilitation of peer support, networking and collegiality.

The following occur throughout the Network:

- o On-going practice and application of skills and information gained during the regional meetings and academies;
- o Development of regional plans to reach out to, involve, and educate regular education teachers;
- o Formation of regional advisory groups to assume increasing leadership in the regional Network.

Results of job satisfaction surveys completed during each of the years of implementation demonstrate that the Network has increased the level of satisfaction of its participants. After four years, the most obvious result has been a lessening of feelings of isolation. The support goes further, however, to a specific sharing of resources and teaching strategies that help participating teachers not only feel better, but do better in their jobs. Maine's Support Network is clearly having a positive impact, as indicated by the following comments from participants, in response to the question: "What insights have you gained through your participation in the Network?"

- o **The commitment needed to be/stay in special education and the opportunity for creativity/innovation in special education;**
- o **We are all a very knowledgeable group of professionals; there are many people out there to help--just seek;**
- o **That I am not alone;**
- o **I learned a variety of resources that would benefit me as a "rural" resource teacher;**
- o **The Network is working. Already networking is occurring informally as a result of the sharing and activities. For example, I have met with one of the members of the Network to help her through some professional hurdles. It is encouraging to know that when given the opportunity to share ideas and experiences, others really do want to listen and learn.**

The Network, though designed specifically to meet the needs of Maine's special educators, has applicability elsewhere, particularly in rural regions. The basic structure, processes, and materials used can easily be replicated. Originally funded by a Federal Government grant, the Network recieves 70% of its funds from the State of Maine, and by 1991 will be fully State funded.

For further information on Maine's Support Network for Rural Special Educators, please contact:

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